



City of Houston Testimony on House Bill 1956
House Committee on Corrections
April 11, 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to express the City of Houston's support of House Bill 1956.

This bill provides for transparency of government between the state and local jurisdictions. State law authorizes the board of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to contract for temporary or permanent housing of inmates for public or private jails or operators of alternative housing facilities. TDCJ authorizes alternative housing facilities for housing of parolees throughout the state.

Some history within the City of Houston, in March 2017, a fire in a boarding home and a fire in an unlicensed lodging facility resulted in three deaths and the emergency evacuation of 29 elderly and disabled residents. The Mayor formed an internal working group of city departments to review and revise relevant ordinances. The working group identified three different types of group home that exist in the City of Houston, 1) Boarding Homes, 2) Lodging Facilities and 3) Alternative Housing Facility/Correctional Facility. As these types of homes were reviewed it was determined that they required stronger building safety regulations because no other regulatory body at the state or federal level governed the facility safety issues. The working group researched the process by which TDCJ authorizes alternative housing facilities to be placed on the resource listing. Current TDCJ application process requires submission of an application with requested documentation and a review of a basic checklist by a district parole office. The checklist covers items such as: living space per parolee, meal planning, clothing, access to public transportation and child safety zone. The checklist does not cover building safety, such as observance of unpermitted additions/conversions, access to fire extinguishers and smoke and carbon monoxide alarms.

At the time the ordinance was approved by the City Council (March 2018), Houston had 99 approved alternative housing facilities within the corporate limits, Austin had 31, Dallas had 27 and Fort Worth had 12. Without zoning, Houston has a large number of these facilities approved within the corporate limits in comparison to other Texas cities. Houston as of December 2018 had 87 approved locations with 10 locations currently pending authorization from TDCJ.

To obtain information about alternative housing facilities, local governments can only obtain location and occupancy data through a cumbersome public information request process. Without knowledge of these facilities, it is difficult for local government to follow up on concerns from citizens regarding unsafe living conditions and overcrowded facilities that may be housing parolees. Building safety for those living in and around these facilities is important and warrants a change in state law to allow easier access to information from the state rather than through the public information request process. The information would be provided to a local jurisdiction that requests the information. After the initial request, the data is required to be provided by the 10th business day of each month.

In addition, this bill would require TDCJ to ensure that all local requirements are met as they are approving alternative housing facilities to locate state parolees be it permitting requirements or zoning requirements.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill.